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Face to face vs. blended learning: What are the relative merits?

C4ME SUPPLEMENT

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Link to YouTube Video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNI3f_6sHyo

Background

Cardiff University is one of just three UK Higher Education Institutions providing Level 7 vocational training for genetic counsellors – the academic qualification required for clinical practice. In 2017, in response to a developing market, Cardiff University changed their 2-year, full-time face to face (FTF) MSc Genetic Counselling (GC) degree to a 3-year, part-time, blended learning (BL) Genetic and Genomic MSc programme. BL programmes use a combination of traditional FTF teaching with a variety of online resources allowing students to complete modules from home. In this respect, Cardiff University has introduced an innovative approach to GC education.

Within the existing literature there is evidence that student satisfaction and overall outcomes are not diminished when using distance learning techniques. (1) This study will use qualitative methods to explore the engagement, satisfaction and perceptions of genetic counsellors who have been educated at Cardiff University through the FTF programme and the BL programme.

Methods

A recruitment video was sent to past and present students on the Genetic and Genomic Counselling MSc at Cardiff University via email and a closed Facebook group. Eligible students contacted the research lead and were sent the Participant Information Sheet and consent form, which were collected by the research lead prior to the participant being contacted by the researcher.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Cardiff University School of Medicine Research Ethics Committee (Ref. 18/71).

Eligible participants were those that had completed either the Genetic Counselling or currently on the Genetic and Genomic Counselling MSc at Cardiff University. Only those in their third year of the new Genetic and Genomic Counselling MSc were included due to having the most experience of the programme. There were 33 eligible students in total. From a group of 20 old FTF Genetic Counselling MSc graduates, 6 took part in this study (30% response rate) and from a group of 13 current BL Genetic and Genomic Counselling MSc students, 7 took part (54% response rate).

A qualitative approach was used to explore the thoughts and feelings of both sets of students regarding the two programmes. (2) Semi-structured interviews were used to allow participants to discuss different aspects of the programmes. (3) The interviews were conducted by the researcher over Skype or over telephone depending on the accessibility of participants. The transcripts were analysed using an inductive thematic approach. (4) Two transcripts were sent to the project lead for double coding.

Results

Participants discussed many benefits of BL, praising the flexibility of being able to undertake the programme remotely and also being able to complete tutorials at a time that suited them, which enabled them to optimise their focus. Other benefits of the BL programme included being able to keep their current job to aid with financial support, being able to revisit online content, having supportive staff and having valuable clinical placements. The main limitations of BL were identified as the high workload, difficulties with maintaining a work/life balance and technological glitches.

When discussing the old FTF programme, participants commended the ability to make strong bonds with peers through shared experiences of physically attending group teaching sessions. However, they also described the presence of 'dead time', like commuting and gaps between sessions, which was seen as a waste of their time. In addition, many found the programme to be a substantial commitment with regards to relocating and funding.

Participants from both groups offered potential improvements for the BL course, including introducing a 'Buddy' system, using more 'Ice Breakers' early in the course, being more upfront about the high workload and changing the dissertation year to close the gap between placement and beginning work.

Discussion

This study revealed valuable insights into the benefits and drawbacks of FTF and BL programmes, and highlighted areas for improvement in the newly implemented programme at Cardiff University. Students praised the peer and staff relationships and appreciated the flexibility and efficacy of the distance learning elements, whilst still benefitting from the more sensitive counselling training in the FTF blocks.

Overall, participants on the BL programme found that completing the course remotely increased their initial feelings of isolation, but felt that FTF blocks were effective in building strong connections with peers that allowed them to continue these friendships when they returned home. The constructive feedback for the BL programme is highly valuable for the purpose of exploring how to improve the delivery of the MSc to future cohorts and identifying the direction of future research that aims to maximise the efficacy and student satisfaction of BL programmes.

Lessons Learnt

In undertaking this research, I gained an appreciation of the importance of using student feedback to see the advantages and disadvantages of different learning programmes, to ensure both effective learning and student satisfaction. Furthermore, comparing and contrasting insights from each group meant I developed an understanding of how such a dramatic change in educational delivery can affect multiple aspects of learning experiences. Listening to participants' thoughts and experiences emphasised the importance of frequent and open student feedback and the value of this when organising an educational programme.

This research also highlighted the importance of using new interactive, collaborative technology alongside traditional educational methods to deliver a higher education degree. Having seen how well aspects of the BL programme have worked for the GC MSc, I feel that if more of these online learning platforms were incorporated into other courses at Cardiff University, it could greatly enhance the learning experience of their students.

Finally, this project has underlined how BL courses widen access to certain degrees, such as GC. Thus, BL not only allows people to learn remotely but also, part-time, alongside work and family commitments, which is especially significant given the current context of COVID-19 and the subsequent shift to remotely delivered higher education.

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